



Above: a specimen page from *Silver Spoons of Britain...* documenting the wodewose finial spoon of c.1440 from the Benson collection, featured right, which sold in 2013 for £70,000.

Constable serves up spoon classic

Mark Bridge meets the man behind one of the most comprehensive histories of silver spoons ever published

WHEN you visit David Constable it does not take long in his company to realise that he is likely to excel at anything he sets out to achieve. From the wrought-iron garden gate he forged himself to the swimming pool with views over East Sussex that he built for his wife – it all speaks of careful thought and dogged determination.

But if you were asked to picture the typical silver collector, I do not think that Constable would spring immediately to mind. And for the first 40 years of his life he would have agreed with you. A down-to-earth and eminently practical man, Constable was apprenticed as a blacksmith and engineer when he left school at 15. He went on to a varied career in engineering which included vintage car restoration and, most notably, the development of the Carchair – the world’s first fully-tested wheelchair designed to function as a car seat, from which he developed a substantial business. With so much else going on in his life, there was little sign of the man

who would serve as chairman of the Silver Society in 2006-07 and go on to write two major works on silver spoons, the most recent of which, his monumental two-volume *Silver Spoons of Britain 1200-1710*, was published in September. **Curiosity awakened** Everything changed in 1997 when his wife Grace came home with an Elkington silver-plated Stilton scoop and David immediately set his mind to finding out more about it. “I did not even know how to read a hallmark,” he admits. “But my curiosity was awakened.” After a few forays to local antique shops, he purchased his first spoon on holiday in Guernsey from Paint & Sons in St Peter Port. “They showed me a seal top by Edward Hole, 1634, and I left with it in my pocket,” he says. “On the flight home Grace was reading *Country Life* and noticed an advertisement for a silver course with Vanessa Brett at Sotheby’s. I signed up for it.” On the course, one of the handling sessions took place at London silver

dealers Bourdon-Smith and it was here that Constable met Tim Kent, who quickly became his friend and mentor. “My one spoon passed muster and I left with two or three of Tim’s books,” he recalls. He was now well and truly hooked and further long discussions of silver, and spoons in particular, followed. As his confidence grew, so did his collection and Constable has clear memories of the acquisition of his first pieces, particularly of his first encounter with the legendary Mrs How (née Benson) whose expertise in silver was matched only by her eccentricities as a dealer. There were obstacles even before

he was ushered into the great lady’s presence. “My introduction to her came via a letter from Bourdon-Smith, which prompted a call from Mrs How asking them for what amounted to a character reference before I received an invitation to call and see her,” he says. Further tests were in store. “I had to take my spoon collection for her to inspect, about 16 examples at the time. Once we were introduced she beckoned me over and I found myself on my knees in front of her, laying out my collection on the low coffee table. It was at this moment I felt the hot breath of her huge English mastiffs on the back of my neck as they sprang forward to defend her. “She was a formidable woman, but I came to learn that she was actually very kind. Once she had accepted you, then if she could help you she would. But woe-betide anyone who came across as a know-it-all,” he continues. “My own passport was my collection. There were spoons she had seen and recognised, one that she thought was a fake, but I passed on to the next level and she showed me some

“A down-to-earth and eminently practical man, Constable was apprenticed as a blacksmith and engineer when he left school at 15



Silver spoons: the human factor

DAVID Constable has created two beautiful volumes in an age when beautiful books are few and far between. Every spoon has been photographed from many different angles, displaying not only the beauty but the individual quirks and imperfections of each piece. The meat of the book is a complete survey of early English spoons, presented chronologically by type and beginning with the acorn and baluster knobs of the first known examples. Finials are the main distinguishing feature of the period and the survey moves on through Apostle spoons to human finials, lion sejant spoons, seal tops, Puritan spoons and the trefid spoons of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Each spoon is fully described with details of its size, weight and marks, provenance and exhibition history. While the approach is always methodical, the results are not as dry as they may sound, for wherever there are human stories they have been included. For instance, when dealing with a late 17th century group known as ‘Death’s Head’ spoons Constable makes a valid case for these being christening spoons given to members of the

Strickland family in Yorkshire. The prominent skull on each spoon is a reference to the Strickland family motto ‘Live to die, die to live’ and his detailed research into the family history is just one instance where the text really comes to life. Equally interesting from a human interest point of view are the provenances. Constable has taken great pains to trace the history of previous ownership whenever he can and one of his most interesting introductory chapters sets down all that is known of the major collectors of the past, progressing in alphabetical order from Albert to Winfield, via Benson and Jackson, and now adding one more name to the list – Constable. A similar useful ancillary chapter gives biographical details of all the makers mentioned in the text and this can be cross-referenced to an invaluable appendix with photographs of all the goldsmiths’ marks in tabular form. *Silver Spoons of Britain 1200-1710* by David JE Constable, Constables Publishing, 2 vols, 1034 pages, 2200 illus, £395 + p&p, can be ordered from dc@constablespublishing.com or silverspoonsofgreatbritain.com



The Benson wodewose in all its glory – each spoon featured in the book is illustrated from multiple angles.

of her own spoons. She had 30 laid out but there were no prices. I handled them all and was determined to buy something. “When the moment of decision came I asked which spoons were for sale. She indicated two York apostles that she did not want to part with so I selected six and just hoped that I could afford them. As I made my choices she wrote down the stock numbers. A pro-forma invoice would follow. It took three months for that invoice to arrive, and when it did I wished that I had bought them all!” **Rise of the scholar** As Constable’s collection grew so did his interest in scholarship. He pored over and annotated the catalogues of earlier spoon collectors and his first publication was *The Benson Collection of English Spoons*, an account of Mrs How’s life and the 45 spoons from her own collection that were then on display in the Ashmolean Museum. This appeared in 2012, but he had already begun work on the much larger master work which has now been published. “My new book represents 10 years of research. It has been hard work but there have been wonderfully privileged moments when curators at major museums have opened their cabinets and reserve collections and we have gone through them together. The exchange of information in these

circumstances is hugely valuable to both sides,” says Constable. As a collector, he admits that there was once an ambition to collect a spoon of every type from as many towns as possible. “If I had been in a position to buy freely when the remaining part of the Benson collection came up for sale in 2013, I could have come close, but I could not afford it,” he says. Instead he has created his dream collection in print, and the result is a history of English silver spoons that will be hard to beat. “Scholarship is always moving on. Just as I can now look back and correct some of the assumptions that Mrs How made back in the 1950s, so my own work will be revised and improved. What I do hope will be of really lasting value is the photography. Vanessa Brett advised me to invest in the best possible illustrations and that is what I have done,” he says. The effort of documenting and photographing every spoon of significance has been immense, but as he saw off the final proofs and awaited the printed volumes, he was already on to his next project – the flower and vegetable garden that he had always promised his wife. So, will we be hearing the name Constable banded about at the *Chelsea Flower Show* in a few years’ time perhaps? I would not be at all surprised. ■

Early examples A PAIR of early Charles II trefid spoons – one pictured right – that carry a modest estimate of **£1200-1500** at Sworders on November 30 receive a substantial entry in *Silver Spoons of Britain 1200-1710* by David Constable. Engraved with the coat of arms of the Pyrat family, and marked with the initials *JK* over a rosette for the specialist spoon maker John King, London, 1664, when first published in *English and Scottish Silver Spoons, Mediaeval to Late Stuart* by Commander GEP How (1953) they were considered the earliest known spoons of the type that became commonplace in the 1670s. (Commander How was married to Mrs How – see story, left.) Subsequently another example by the same maker dated 1662 came to light. Together their survival confirms that the trefid – known at the time as ‘French spoons’ – had arrived in England from the continent very shortly after the Restoration. The pair is from the family of Col SL Bibby CBE, a collector of some note in the post-war period and an important client of How. One of the pair is in almost mint condition with original file marks and workman’s guide lines still visible to stem and bowl. So well struck are the marks that it is possible to see clearly that the date letter G includes a small pellet in its design – an unusual addition that hints at the whiff of scandal that passed through the Goldsmiths Company in 1664. As detailed in *Silver Spoons of Britain...*, it was under the watch of assayer Alexander Jackson that old hallmarking punches had been removed from Goldsmiths’ Hall and used to mark debased plate. Jackson and his son were immediately discharged from their positions and replaced in late October 1664 by a new assayer, John Brattle, with new punches – including the ‘Great Letter G in an Escutcheon’ – ordered from engraver Thomas Symons. The addition of a pellet to a date letter midway through the year was not unprecedented: a similar device was added to mark a change of assayer in 1567-68. According to volume two of *Constable’s Silver Spoons of Britain*, the maker’s mark of a bird’s claw struck to a pair of Elizabethan apostle spoons (London, 1562) is for Francis Jackson. One finial depicts St Peter (pictured left), the other The Master, with both bowls scratch-engraved with ownership initials *SB* and *MB*. The pair took **£15,500** at Woolley & Wallis on October 25.

